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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 004767

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [IN](#) [RS](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: MEA INSISTS INDIAN POLICY ON U.S.-LED MISSILE
DEFENSE HAS NOT CHANGED

REF: A. NEW DELHI 8353

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 8105

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 02039

Classified By: Acting PolCouns Atul Keshap, for reasons 1.4 (a, b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Following the October 24 trilateral meeting in Harbin, China, reporters asked Indian Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee if India was going to join a U.S.-led missile defense system. Mukherjee dismissed the idea as "groundless." Despite press reports here signaling an abrupt shift away from the U.S. on missile defense, MEA contacts confirm this did not mean India was not interested in continuing to cooperate with the U.S. on missile defense technology and that there has been no change from the current level of bilateral missile defense cooperation. Indian officials tell us Mukherjee's comments were misconstrued by the Indian press, who failed to distinguish between the missile defense system discussed between the U.S. and Russia recently and the more generalized cooperation on missile defense agreed to by the U.S. and India in the 2005 Defense Framework. Foreign Secretary Menon's explanation of the Mukherjee comment is reported septel. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Foreign Ministers of India, Russia and China met October 24 in Harbin, China for their third "troika" meeting. During the press conference after the trilateral, Mukherjee was asked by reporters if India would participate in the U.S.-led missile defense system, and replied that the Foreign Ministers had not discussed missile defense during the trilateral, and explained "India does not take part in such military arrangements." (Comment: Reporters were apparently referring to the U.S.-led initiative to install missile-detection systems in Europe, to which both the Russian and Chinese officials had just made statements. End Comment).

[1](#)3. (SBU) Mukherjee's comments were apparently taken out of context by several media outlets such as the Times of India, who published an article October 24 under the headline "India won't be part of US Missile Defense system: Pranab (Mukherjee)." The Hindu also published an article including the subheading "Not to be part of U.S. defense arrangement."

13. (SBU) While Indian media suggested Mukherjee's statement was a departure from India's support of the U.S. concept of missile defense (MD), it was not inconsistent with the GOI's longstanding position on MD cooperation with the U.S. The GOI has engaged with the U.S. on exploratory talks on MD since 2001, with both sides exchanging visits of technical teams and policymakers, yet India has thus far not agreed to extend the cooperation beyond discussion into more binding collaboration. While serving as Minister of Defense in 2005, Mukherjee stated that India has no intention of "accepting a missile shield from anyone." MEA Director Amandeep Singh Gill (Disarmament and International Security) confirmed to PolOff October 26 that Mukherjee's comment in Harbin cannot be interpreted as a deviation from the status quo of current U.S.-India MD cooperation. Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony declared publicly on October 25 that despite domestic political opposition from Indian Leftist parties, "military interaction with the U.S. will continue" into the future.

-- BACKGROUND --

14. (C) India was among the first countries to welcome President Bush's May 2001 call for development of missile defenses. President Bush first proposed the possibility of exploring cooperation on MD with India in a May 2001 meeting with then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and officials from both countries discussed this idea in more detail at the 2001 and 2002 U.S.-India Defense Policy Group meetings. Then-Defense Minister Mukherjee and SecDef Rumsfeld agreed to expand collaboration relating to missile defense in the July 2005 U.S.-India Defense Framework Agreement. India has incorporated missile defense into its national security policy, as articulated by Dr. Saraswat, the Indian scientist

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in charge of India's MD program, who told Emboffs during U.S.-India bilateral talks in April 2007 that India's MD program "was in keeping with the two stated policies for India's nuclear program" (ref A)(i.e. no first use, and maintaining a minimum credible deterrent.) At the time Saraswat went on to clarify that "Indian policy makers have not yet devised an overarching MD policy."

15. (SBU) After 2001 India began to consider purchasing off-the-shelf MD systems such as the U.S. Patriot 3, the Israeli-U.S. Arrow 2, and the Russian S-300 system. While not entirely abandoning those plans, the GOI has focused its attention increasingly on developing indigenous MD system capabilities, giving the go-ahead to its Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) to produce a working model. DRDO's achievements in creating a functioning BMD system have been modest, with only one claimed successful test of a missile interceptor vehicle over the Bay of Bengal in November 2006 (ref B).

-- COMMENT: NO CHANGE IN INDIAN POLICY --

16. (C) COMMENT: Mukherjee's comments were apparently taken out of context, but our MEA contacts reassured us that his answer did not represent a deviation from the GOI's current level of cooperation on MD with the U.S., which has thus far been confined to technical and fact-finding discussions. Given the current state-of-play of political churn in domestic Indian politics, with the UPA administration taking great heat from the Left over any cooperation with the U.S., it is not surprising that the media would twist Mukherjee's statements into an apparent rejection of U.S.-led initiatives. It is also reassuring that Antony publicly signaled business-as-usual in U.S.-India military to military cooperation, despite what the Left wants. END COMMENT.
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